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With the German railroad strike in its third day, freight containers were tied up yesterday on a cable-stay bridge in the northern port of Hamburg.

## Bitter Strike by a Small Union Disrupts the German Rail System

By MARK LANDLER

FRANKFURT, Nov. 15 — A bitter strike by train drivers in Germany has tied up freight traffic, shut down an auto factory and stranded hundreds of thousands of passengers in what has become the German state rail system's largest work stoppage.

Since Thursday morning, when the three-day strike spread from freight trains to commuter and long-distance service, Germans have gotten a taste of the chaos in France, where the railroads are also paralyzed.

But while the French strike is the result of a power struggle between the labor unions and a new government, the German job action reflects what labor experts regard as a bold gamble by an isolated union.

The locomotive drivers' union is demanding a 31 percent increase in wages from the Deutsche Bahn, the state company that operates Germany's railroads — far more than the 4.5 percent raises agreed to in July by the company's other, larger unions.

The Deutsche Bahn has rejected this initial demand, saying the union's bid for a wage deal of its own would splinter Germany's tradition of collective bargaining, in which several unions sign on to the same contract.

The union, known by its German initials as the G.D.L., argues that its members are paid less than train drivers, or engineers, in other European countries. It points to other skilled workers,

like pilots and air-traffic controllers, who have begun organizing outside mainstream unions.

Strikes of this magnitude are rare in Germany, which values consensus in its labor relations, and rarer still when the employer is a state monopoly like the Deutsche Bahn. No other big union is supporting the strike, nor is the German federation of trade unions.

Chancellor Angela Merkel has so far declined to intervene but has expressed qualms about giving the union an exclusive contract. Government officials, who are seeking the railway, pleaded with the two sides to sit down for negotiations.

That seems unlikely in the short term, given the stream of vitriol from the company and the union.

"What I cannot understand is that the country can be raped — as it has been for months now — just because Deutsche Bahn management refuses to take up negotiations," Manfred Schell, the union's tough-talking leader, said in an interview on German public television.

The Deutsche Bahn accused the union, which it says represents only 3 percent of the railroad's work force, of seeking to increase its power.

"Stop this insanity, Mr. Schell!" it said in a full-page advertisement in several German newspapers. It sued the union for 5 million euros (\$7.3 million) in damages from a strike in July.

As each side digs in, the strike

threatens to dent the German economy, which has hummed along nicely for the last year but is showing signs of slowing. The Deutsche Bahn said the strike was costing 50 million euros (\$73 million) a day, and could cost more than \$700 million if it lasted

*As engineers seek 31% raises, a government seeking privatization declines to intervene.*

more than a week.

Among companies, Audi said it canceled three shifts at its factory in Brussels because of delays in deliveries of body panels for its cars. The panels are made in Bratislava, Slovakia, and transported across Germany by train.

"The major problems are in eastern Germany, where there are huge delays," an Audi spokesman, Eric Felber, said.

New cars are piling up outside factories as Audi and other carmakers, which depend heavily on trains, look for other ways to ship them. The port of Hamburg has become clogged with containers.

For the Deutsche Bahn, the standoff comes at a bad time. Chancellor Merkel's government hopes to sell as much as 49 percent of the company on the market by 2009. But even before the

strike, the plan was bogging down in squabbles between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, who govern Germany in an increasingly fractious coalition.

"This strategy isn't very good for Deutsche Bahn's reputation," said Hermann Reichold, a professor of labor law at the University of Tübingen. "They can't afford this kind of chaos."

The stakes for the G.D.L. are even higher. Founded in 1867, it says it is Germany's oldest union. But it has become a renegade, breaking with other unions in wage negotiations with Deutsche Bahn because it felt the interests of its rank and file were not being served.

Some critics of organized labor say the G.D.L. is no different from any other German union — fighting to stay relevant with an aging membership and dwindling influence. But the union says only 35 percent of its 34,000 members are retired, a number that has not changed in a decade, and that it has not lost members.

"We don't feel isolated," Claus Weselsky, the union's vice chairman, said in an interview. "We're convinced the future of labor lies in these highly organized unions for specialized workers. The big unions can't serve them."

French Strike Is Extended

By The New York Times

PARIS, Nov. 15 — Travelers and commuters in France were

resigning themselves to a third day of transport disruptions after unions voted Thursday to extend a national strike for at least another day. But there were signs that the walkout might be losing momentum after the government offered to negotiate on its pension overhaul plan.

President Nicolas Sarkozy, whose plans to change retirement benefits for 500,000 public employees prompted the strike, has granted a request by labor leaders for a meeting of unions, companies and a government representative.

The French labor minister, Xavier Bertrand, has made clear that the centerpiece of the overhaul, which would increase the number of years required for public employees to be eligible for pensions, was not negotiable.

But in a letter to unions Wednesday night, he proposed a one-month period to discuss ways of making the changes acceptable to each of the public companies that still offer the early-retirement benefits in question, notably state-controlled transportation companies and utilities.

"Our red lines are known. They haven't changed," Mr. Sarkozy's spokesman, David Martinon, said Thursday. He also seemed confident that a quick end to the walkout was possible, adding, "We are not pessimistic."